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Does the national test in English increase comparability and fairness of final grades?

Engelska
C-uppsats

Termin: Vårterminen 2009
Handledare: Moira Linnarud

Abstract

Titel: Does the national test in English increase comparability and fairness of final grades?

Författare: Jonsson, Amine
Engelska C, 2009

Antal sidor: 22

Abstract: National tests have an important function in ensuring reliable grades, and grades at many schools function as a sorting instrument to upper secondary school and higher education, the purpose of this essay has been to investigate if the assessment of English national tests is fair and consistent. The purpose has also been to find out if teachers consider the national test as an important basis when determining a student's final grade. This particular investigation showed that national tests are assessed differently by different teachers. The investigation also showed that final grades are strongly influenced by national test grades. It is of great importance that the assessment of the national test is fair and consistent and that the result of the assessment will be the same no matter who carries it out; however the result shows that it is open to question if the national test can be considered to contribute to comparability and fairness of grades. The assessment differences indicate otherwise.

Nyckelord: English national test, final grade, assessment, comparability, fairness

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1 Introduction

Each year the National Agency for Education requires national tests to be carried out for all students in compulsory school (in 5th grade and 9th grade), upper secondary school and adult education courses. One of its general principles is to increase comparability and fairness within the school system by clarifying the nationally decided goals and criteria. Its main purpose is therefore to support and advise teachers in their decisions regarding students' individual competences (Erickson 2007: 1). The test consists of several components which test students' oral interaction, their receptive ability (in reading and listening) and also their writing ability.

It is, however, not possible to test all aspects in one single test and therefore the national test's result is to be advisory, but not determine the grade (Erickson 2007: 1). The teacher should take all performance information available into consideration for each particular student. This means that the result of a national test is only *part* of the teacher's collected assessment in relation to the goals. Yet, it seems as if many teachers use the national test as the basis when they determine a student's final grade.

1.1 Aim

National tests have an important function in ensuring a reliable assessment of grades. As grades are, to a large extent, a sorting instrument to upper secondary school and higher education, my aim is to investigate if teachers consider the English national test as an important basis when determining a student's final grade. My aim is also to investigate if the assessment of national tests is consistent and reliable among different teachers.

2 Background

In a study carried out at the request of the Swedish National Agency for Education (Ramstedt 2005: 14), it is said that there is strong resistance to national tests in many countries but that this is not the case in Sweden. Instead the research shows that all stakeholders consistently express high confidence in national tests, and that they regard them as an important tool in many respects. The study showed that students feel assured of fairness and consistency in the assessment of the test since all students take the same test across the country. However, they did feel that final grades are influenced by national test grades to a larger degree than teachers say.

2.1 The importance of grades

The fact that grades are a sorting instrument for higher education makes them very important to most students. In some municipalities, the selection of students for upper secondary school is based on the average final grade from basic compulsory school. Also, the present selection rules for higher studies, such as academic studies, require that at least one third of the students should be selected on the basis of grades from upper secondary school (Ramstedt 2005: 16-18).

2.2 Teachers' influence and responsibility

The teachers' professional influence has increased since the curriculum introduced major changes in the school system in 1980 and 1994. Teachers (and principals) are responsible for students achieving the national goals, and teachers solely decide a student's grade in relation to goals and grading criteria. It is also the teachers, in consultation with the students, who decide the content of the courses and teaching methods. Additionally, teachers have shifted from a more individual to a more collaborative way of working, while in contrast students have shifted from working as part of a class collective to a more individual-oriented way of working, and more emphasis has been put on students' participation and responsibility (Ramstedt 2005: 12-25).

2.3 Decentralized assessment

From an international point of view it is not very common that teachers upgrade their own students, but in Sweden they do. One of the benefits is that the teachers feel that they have the authorities' trust and respect. Another benefit is that it is easier for the teacher to discover a student's potential weaknesses. Additionally, it is more economical to have teachers assessing the test, rather than external assessors, within their work hours (Ramstedt 2005: 8,21).

A disadvantage, on the other hand, is the teachers' workload as it reduces effective teaching time and other possible teaching activities. But even if such disadvantages are expressed, most teachers want to be responsible for the assessment of their own class. The risk with such a system is that teachers might be tempted to upgrade their own students. But according to Ramstedt's report there is an informal consensus that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages (Ramstedt 2005: 8-9).

2.4 The relationship between national test grades and final grades

When students' final grades are determined, the teacher has to take all performance information available into consideration, which means that the national test should also be considered when final grades are determined. However, it should only be considered as one of several assessment components. The national test itself does not cover all stipulated goals and grading criteria that must be satisfied for a student to receive a final grade. Therefore, a final grade can never be based only on a national test result (Ramstedt 2005: 25).

This is also stated in Auer and Sandqvist's (2007) report; the national tests are not supposed to have a controlling effect in such a way that teachers grade students on the sole basis of the national test results. The report also explains that the Swedish Board of Education has not expressed any opinion on how closely the final grades must correspond with the test results. A total correspondence between final grades and national test grades would indicate that the national test is wrongly used as a final exam test (Auer & Sandqvist 2007: 10).

In Ramstedt's comparison of national test grades and final grades at the national level in the subject Swedish, year nine, in 2004, he found that forty percent of the students' final grades differed from the national test grade. Furthermore, his analysis showed that there was a large variation between national test grades and final grades in different schools. Only in a minority of schools did the national test grades exceed the final grades. The investigation also showed that students in some schools could not get a higher final grade than they got on the national test (Ramstedt 2005: 27-28). Additionally, the report says that the national test has a bigger impact on final grades in upper secondary school since some courses are quite short. The tests therefore contribute more to the total assessment than in basic compulsory school where teachers have taught students for a longer period of time and therefore are better positioned to grade their students (Ramstedt 2005: 26).

Auer and Sandqvist (2007: 14-25) investigated the connection between national test grades and final grades between 1998 and 2006 in the basic compulsory school. They reported that final grades are somewhat higher than the national test grades in Swedish, Mathematics and English. However, in English the test grades and the final grades are very close, and in 2003 the final grades exceeded the national test grades. Still, there are big differences between different schools. At one school seventy-three percent of all students received a higher final grade than the national test grade and at another school fifty-three percent of all students

received a lower final grade than the national test grades. Additionally, it was more common that students received a higher final grade if they failed the national test but it was less common that students received a higher grade when they passed the test. Auer and Sandqvist's report also shows that there are teachers at some schools (thirteen out of 1289) who systematically give their students the same final grades as they have attained on the national tests.

2.5 Reasons for variation between national grades and final grades

As selection to higher education is to a large extent based on final grades, and the national tests play an important role in ensuring a standardized and reliable assessment. Schools are therefore obligated to explain large differences between test grades and final grades. Such explanations vary, but some of the explanations are that there has been an "increased input of resources after national tests were conducted, or large discrepancies between taught content and national test content" (Ramstedt 2005: 28). According to Auer & Sandqvist (2007: 11,22) the large variation between national test grades and final grades in different schools is an indication of how much the interpretation of the nationally decided goals and criteria adaption varies, which proves that there actually are interpretation differences of the nationally decided grading criteria.

Interpretation differences are also something that is acknowledged in Anna Korp's report (2006: 80). According to her report, other reasons are that there are significant differences in the preparation and implementation of the tests between theoretical programs (leading to higher education) and vocational programs at upper secondary school. Additionally, she found that the tests were weighted very differently in grading, and states that some teachers on vocational programs stretched the rules when the test measured something that was far from their own teaching. Rules were also stretched by schools that were below par in order not to have to fail large groups of students. The fact that the students lacked certain knowledge was not felt to be as important as the students failing the course and as a consequence not being able to take up an apprenticeship. Teachers at vocationally oriented programs were of the opinion that it was acceptable to be generous in their grading of the tests, as they felt that core subjects did not have the same degree of relevance as the vocational specialization in question (Korp 2006).

3 Material and methods

In March 2009 national tests in English were carried out in schools all over the country in 5th and 9th grade. On my request I was given a copy of a test carried out by a student in 9th grade from a teacher I know. I then decided to let 10 different teachers assess the received test. The purpose was to investigate if the assessment of the national test is consistent and reliable no matter who assesses the test. The teachers did also receive 6 questions in order to find out if teachers consider the English national test as an important basis when determining a student's final grade. Below you will find more detailed information about how the investigation was carried out.

3.1 Data acquisition method and method criticism

Since I had decided that the investigation was to be carried out at different schools and in different cities, I chose the teachers and the schools at random using the internet and then emailed them the written text and the questions. It would have been preferable to carry out interviews with the teachers, instead of using a questionnaire, in order to be able to ask follow-up questions. But, due to difficulties in reaching the teachers on the phone, I decided to make a questionnaire instead. It was, of course, possible to ask further questions by mail (which turned out to be necessary since two of the teachers had left out their comments on the text).

All ten teachers were given two weeks to grade the text and answer the questions. After one week I reminded them and explained how important this survey was to me. Seven of the ten teachers approached originally replied during the following week.

It is relevant to be aware that the written text, which the teachers were asked to grade, is only one of four components of the English national test. The student's result in the written part is to be weighed together with the others and the student receives a test grade based on the total result from the four components.

3.2 The sample of the English national writing test

The text used in my investigation was given to me by a teacher who had given it the grade 'Fail'. The teacher did not hesitate to fail the test. It was therefore of interest to have other teachers assess the same test in order to find out if the assessment by different teachers would be consistent. The teachers were not informed that the text had been awarded the grade fail,

but were only asked to assess the text using the same national test criteria as used for all students in ninth grade. The teachers were instructed to write some comments on what they based their test grade on.

3.3 Questionnaire

As informed, the teachers were e-mailed a questionnaire with six questions (these questions is presented in the “Result” section). The main purpose of the questions asked was to find out how teachers use the national test when determining a student’s final grade. The questions in the questionnaire are similar to each other in many respects, but my intension is also to find out whether different test grades influence final grades in different ways.

Based on the advice of Patel and Davidsson (2008: 74-75), I have in processing the questionnaire tried to avoid leading questions, negation questions and double questions. I have also taken the language and wording into consideration in order to make the questions as clear as possible and avoid misunderstandings. I have also tried to avoid terminology and emotionally charged words where my own opinions are apparent.

3.4 Research ethical aspects

In order to gain the teachers’ confidence and to increase their motivation to participate constructively in the survey, all teachers were informed about the Research Council's instructions for research ethics (Johansson & Svedner 2006: 29-30). This means that they were informed about the aim of this study. They were also informed that they could ask questions about the study at any time, and that these questions would be responded to truthfully. Furthermore, they were guaranteed that their anonymity would be protected, and that it would not be possible to identify any of the teachers that participated nor any of the schools in the completed report. Additionally, they were instructed that they would be free to cease their participation in this research without any negative consequences.

4 Results

In this section the boy’s written text will be presented as well as the teachers’ assessment and comments on the text. Also the teachers answer on all 6 questions asked will be presented.

4.1 The national writing test that teachers were asked to assess

The following text (essay) was written by a boy in ninth grade when national tests in English were conducted in 2009.

It two month left of the ground school and it's where much thing to do. I don't have G in all subjects so I most work really hard to clear that. I most have G in all subjects if I don't have that then I don't come in on that highschool I will. I will go in a highschool name of futurehighschool. The futurehighschool it's a work highschool.

The first year you go in the school you most to a choose what work do will have, you can choose between Rörmokare it's a man and he ficks watercran and toalett in house and svetsare it's a man and he have a firepistol in the hand and he ficks crack things like a car and that are nice thing to do.

And you can play hockey on the school time to, it's two times in the week and you play with the another guys in the school. I take that school because I think it's can be funny to work with some of that work.

My next choose of school was hotel and restaurang because i like food and it's funny to work with food. The most funniest to work with food it's when it done because it been so good.

4.2 Assessment results

Below are the results and comments of the (seven) teachers' assessment of the boy's text (essay).

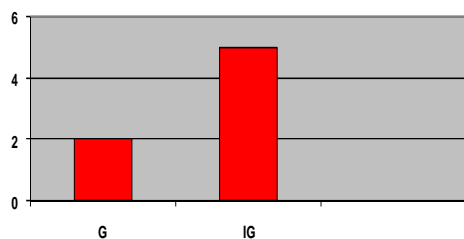


Figure 1: The teachers grading of the boy's text.

Two teachers awarded the student's text the grade 'Pass' (*G), while five teachers did not think that the text reached the criteria for a 'Pass' grade and therefore failed the text. The

teachers made the following comments to support their opinion. Please note that teachers' comments were written in Swedish but have been translated. Furthermore, all names have been changed to protect teachers' anonymity.

Teacher	Test grade	Comments made by the teacher
Karin	Fail (*IG)	<p>(+) The text follows the topic intended. He discusses advantages of the different choices and explains why he considers them. The student makes a fairly successful attempt to explain words that he doesn't know in English (plumber and welder)</p> <p>(-) He makes some lexical mistakes that might be misunderstood by a reader who doesn't know Swedish (clear, ground school, will). He doesn't master common irregular verbs (he have, that are nice things, it's can). The text is very short. It doesn't have a clear introduction and lacks a conclusion.</p>
Susanne	Fail (*IG)	I would not have passed this text since the text is too mixed up with Swedish words and he uses a lot 'Swenglish'. Expressions like "to clear that" are not at a school year nine level. The student also uses English words incorrectly, like the word "funny". The reason that I cannot give the text a 'Pass' is that if an English person reads it, he or she would probably not understand it.
Ida	Fail (*IG)	The text is very short and the content is too weak. It does not feel like the student actually wants to tell and express his thoughts. The text is supposed to be about different choices (crossroads) which are not clearly expressed even if you do understand that it is about upper secondary school programme choices. The student uses Swedish words (rörmokare) instead of using the language he knows. Not even simple sentences are correct. He uses 'Swenglish'.
Victoria	Fail (*IG)	I would not have passed this essay since it is not possible for an

		<p>Englishman to understand the text. His word choice is not so good. Too many Swedish words and too much Swedish wording are used. I don't know anything about the student but it is possible that there might be some problems to take into consideration.</p>
Jimmy	Pass (*G)	<p>I assess it as a 'Pass', but a low 'Pass'. Sometimes auxiliary verbs are missing and he or she has a small vocabulary. Moreover, the text is short and there is hardly any summing up of the alternatives; advantages and disadvantages of different choices, but I think that it is possible to understand what he or she means despite certain deficiencies in the grammar. The student needs to increase his or her vocabulary and improve the use of auxiliary verbs, and he must summarize the text and state some kind of opinion regarding the alternatives.</p>
Maja	Pass (*G)	<p>The student example is awarded a very low 'Pass', but there is a lot that is correct and the text is fully understandable. "Crossroads" is about choice of path which the student has understood. The essay is therefore awarded the grade 'Pass'. The grammar is, however, inadequate, likewise the spelling.</p>
Anna	Fail (*IG)	<p>I would not pass this text. I believe that an Englishman would not understand big parts of it. The student uses a lot of Swedish words that, although they are explained, ruin the understanding of the text. The student shows that he/she knows words like "subject", "choose" and "because" but has in addition too small a vocabulary. The student mixes up "will / want to" and uses the word "clear" incorrectly, which also causes problems. The student, however, makes a good effort and shows that he wants to try to communicate in English, but he/she needs to become more confident at expressing himself in writing.</p>

* IG = A 'Fail' grade in Swedish terms. G = A 'Pass' grade in Swedish terms.

Summary:

Five teachers graded the sample text 'Fail' and two teachers graded it 'Pass'. The different results are due to the fact that five teachers believe that the text would be misunderstood, or not understood at all, by a person that does not speak Swedish since too many Swedish words are used. On the contrary, two teachers would have passed the text since they find it to be understandable despite some grammar deficiencies. However, even though the text was given a 'Pass' by two teachers, they all found the text too short.

4.3 Questionnaire study

The purpose of the questions was mainly to find out whether teachers use the national test as an important basis when determining a student's final grade.

4.3.1 The seven teachers' number of years in the teaching profession

In order to find out if there is any correlation between years in the teaching profession and assessments, teachers were asked to state how many years they had been working as a teacher (question 1).

As can be seen below there is no correlation between the teachers' profession years in the profession and the assessment of the test. The teachers that approved of the text had been working in the profession for fifteen and nineteen years while the ones that failed the text have been in the profession between nine and twenty-five years.

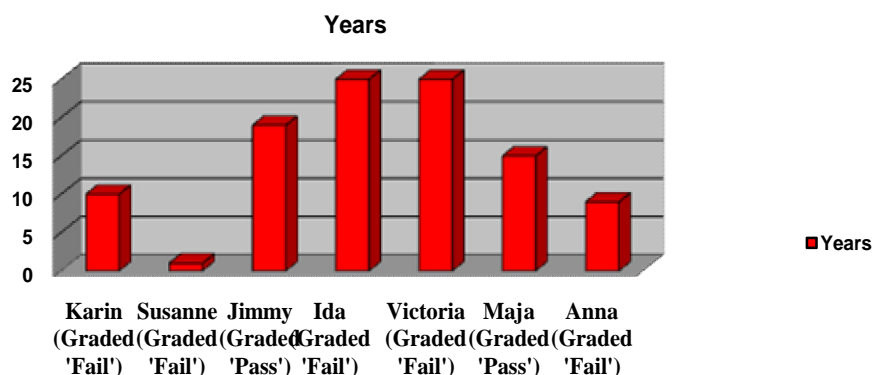


Figure 2: Years in the teaching profession and grades given

4.3.2 Do teachers feel certain in their assessments of the national test?

As the purpose of national tests is to contribute to fair and consistent assessment it is important that all teachers find the syllabus and the instructions for national test assessment comprehensible and clear. The teachers were therefore asked if they sometimes feel uncertain in their assessment of national tests.

Question no 2: Does it happen that you feel uncertain in your assessment of national tests in writing?

Karin:

- Yes, often, particularly when I discuss student texts with other colleagues. The opinions are sometimes different when it comes to the 'borderline cases'; the ones that are in between the grade 'Pass' and 'Pass with distinction'. We often agree more on texts that are in between 'Fail' and 'Pass'.

Susanne:

- Absolutely. Sometimes I receive help from more experienced teachers.

Jimmy

- Yes, but rarely.

Ida:

- Yes. When I feel uncertain about a student text, I ask a colleague to read and comment on a text that I need a second opinion on.

Victoria:

- Most often I feel secure about my assessments.

Maja:

- Yes, that happens sometimes but we have other assessors so it usually works out fine.

Anna:

- Certainly that happens sometimes, but I feel quite certain about their grades. Out of twenty-five students, there are usually two or three texts that you need to work a little extra on, or you ask another colleague to help out with the assessment.

Summary: All teachers answered that they sometimes feel uncertain in their assessment of national tests. On these occasions they take help from a colleague.

4.3.3 The correlation between national test grade and final grade

As mentioned in the introduction it is not possible to test all aspects in one single test and therefore the national test's result is to be advisory, but not determine the grade (Erickson 2007: 1). The teacher should take all performance information available into consideration for each particular student. The result of a national test is only *part* of the teacher's collected assessment in relation to the goals. But since it is claimed that many teachers use the national test as the basis when they determine a student's final grade, it is of interest to investigate to what extent they actually use the national test results when determining the final grades. The teachers were asked to answer and comment upon the questions below.

Question 3: How important are the students' results on the national test when determining final grades?

Karin:

- The test is of importance in such way that if a student passes, it is difficult to justify why he or she should not receive a 'Pass'. The national test tests most aspects and I think that the tests are good. If a student fails the test I see it as a warning signal telling me that there are deficiencies, but one should be aware that low results are sometimes due to nervousness. Therefore, failed students get the opportunity to show what they know, mostly by doing an old test. But usually you already have the information you need to grade a student. As the student's teacher, you have probably already tested all the different aspects earlier; therefore the national test is not the only thing that counts when determining a student's grade. To put it briefly, the test result can raise a student's grade if he or she gets a better result than expected but the test does not lower a student's grade without a second chance.

Susanne:

- Relatively big, but it does not determine the grade since the grade is based on so much else. There are goals to reach according to the course plan and all of these are not tested in the national test. Moreover, the national tests are often difficult, and therefore the grades cannot be based on these.

Jimmy:

- If I have any doubts about a student's grade I usually base the grade on his or her results on the national test.

Ida:

- The national test results do not come up with any surprises very often.

Victoria:

- If the results on the national test are good I usually base a student's grade on the test but if the outcome is poor, I don't pay much consideration to the results.

Maja:

- The test does not determine the grade but it gives guidance.

Anna:

- It is of big importance since the results indicate whether one has assessed the student correctly. It has never happened that I have lowered a grade due to his or her result on the national test but I have on the other hand given the student a higher grade if the test results are better than expected.

Summary:

It is clear that the result on the national test in English is, more or less, an important basis when determining a student's grade, at least when it comes to whether the student is to receive the grade 'Pass' or not. If the student has not been awarded a grade 'Pass' from his or her teacher but achieves a 'Pass' grade on the test, the teachers seem to think that the national test result justifies the grade 'Pass'. But if the student does not 'Pass' the test, most of the teachers do not base the final grade on that test result. Instead final grades are based on other assessments. One can therefore say that final grades are affected when the student benefits from it.

Question no 4: To what extent does the national test grade determine a student's final grade if you consider the student to be in between two grades?

Karin:

- I tend to increase the grade if the national test results are better than I thought they would be.

Susanne:

- The results are not of any importance. One can have a bad day when national tests are carried out and therefore have a poor result.

Jimmy:

- Big, but one often knows a student's grade since one has had them for four years.

Ida:

- The national test gives me guidance.

Victoria:

- If they achieve a good result the result affects the final grade, but if they have a poor result it does not mean very much.

Maja:

- I am positive in my assessment.

Anna:

- Then, the national test result becomes crucial.

Summary:

Most of the teachers say that the national test grade is crucial when it comes to determining a student's grade if the teacher finds the student to be between two grades. Only two teachers say that it is not the test result that determines if the student will receive the lower or the higher grade. Two teachers express that they let the test result determine the final grade only if the result is better than expected which means that if the result is not as good as expected, these teachers do not lower the final grade.

Question no 5: According to your opinion, if the student does not reach the goals and criteria for a 'Pass' grade but achieves a 'Pass' grade on the national test, what final grade will the student receive?

Karin:

- He or she will receive a 'Pass'.

Susanne:

- He or she will not receive a 'Pass' since you are not doing the student a favour to pass him or her.

Jimmy:

- He or she will receive a 'Pass' since it might not have been possible for the student to show what he or she is capable of.

Ida:

- The student will receive a 'Pass'.

Victoria:

- The student will receive a 'Pass'.

Maja:

- I check earlier results carefully. If these are not satisfactory the student would not be given a 'Pass'.

Anna:

- It has never happened. Let me put it this way: Once I had a student that had only attended the English lessons five times during the last year but he did the national test in English and passed it without any problems. I asked the headmaster for advice who told me that the student should receive a 'Pass' grade.

Summary:

As many as five students would receive the grade 'Pass' if he or she achieves that grade on the national test even if the teacher does not consider him or her to have reached the goals in the syllabi. One can therefore say that in such circumstances the test result is crucial, and whether the student will pass the subject of English or not is entirely up to his or her result on the national test. Two teachers claim that they would not pass the student even if he or she passed the national test. None of the teachers made any comments that the result must be high in order for the student to receive a 'Pass' in his or her final grade.

Question no 6: If you think that the student has not earned more than the grade 'Pass' but achieves a 'Pass with distinction' on the national test, what will his or hers final grade be?

Karin:

- Then the student probably will receive a 'Pass with distinction'. But the result of the test most often agrees with earlier assessments of the student. However, it is my opinion that the national tests should be assessed centrally and not by the student's teacher.

Susanne:

- I probably would have graded the student with the grade 'Pass' even if the student received a 'Pass with distinction', especially if the test grade contains a minus.

Jimmy:

- It depends if it is a low or a high test grade.

Ida:

- If it is a high test grade, the student will receive a 'Pass with distinction' but if it is a poor test grade the grade will be a 'Pass'.

Victoria:

- I follow the national test results.

Maja:

- I look into the student's earlier results if it is high test grade. If the grade 'Pass with distinction' is poor the student will only receive a 'Pass'.

Anna:

- Then I would look into other assessments that I have done on this student to see if he or she might have produced high 'Pass' assignments. But it has never happened that a student has received a test grade that surprises me.

Summary:

Six teachers express that they would give the student the grade 'Pass with distinction' if the test result was high. One teacher however, says that it is more likely that she would *not* upgrade the student even if he or she received an unexpected result on the national test. On the whole, one can therefore say that the national test has a large impact on the final grade if the student accomplishes better than expected.

5 Analysis and discussion

5.1 How reliable is the assessment of the national tests in English?

As one of the national test's general principles is to increase comparability and fairness of final grades (by clarifying the nationally decided goals and criteria), the purpose of this small survey was to get an idea of how reliable the assessment of the national test in English is. Seven different teachers, from seven different schools around the country, assessed a sample test but did not come to the same conclusions whether the test could be considered a 'Pass' or not. The result shows that two teachers awarded the text the grade 'Pass' while five teachers awarded it the grade 'Fail'. The result indicates that there is reason to question whether the assessments of national tests are fair and consistent.

All five teachers that did not pass the written text have all made the comment that the text cannot be passed for the reason that it contains too many Swedish words. They claim that the

text cannot be understood by someone who does not speak Swedish. On the contrary, the two teachers that awarded the text the grade 'Pass' base their approval on the fact that the text is in fact understandable.

In Auer and Sandqvist's report (2007: 11, 22) it is claimed that the large variation between national test grades and final grades in different schools is an indication of how much the interpretation of the nationally decided goals and criteria adaption varies and that it proves that there actually are differences in the interpretation of the grading criteria. But according to this survey, the different results do not seem to be based on interpretation differences of goals and criteria. Instead the teachers seem to focus on different qualities in the text and therefore have different opinions regarding how well the text communicates.

5.2 Do teachers consider the national test to be an important basis when determining a student's final grade?

When teachers determine a student's final grade they are obliged to take all performance information available into consideration. A national test should therefore only be considered as one of several assessment components and for that reason a final grade should never be based only on a national test result (Ramstedt 2005: 25; Auer & Sandqvist 2007: 10). But according to Ramstedt's report, students feel that final grades are influenced by national tests to a larger degree than teachers claim. My results indicate that this is in fact true. The results of the national test do seem to strongly influence the final grades.

The results show that most teachers asked would upgrade the student if he or she accomplished better than expected. According to Ramstedt's investigation, students in some schools could not get a higher final grade than they got on the national test (Ramstedt 2005: 27-28), and it would therefore have been preferable to ask the teachers if they sometimes give their students a higher final grade than the grade accomplished in the test.

Additionally, the results showed that as many as five students (out of seven) would receive the grade 'Pass' if he or she achieves such grade on the national test even if the teacher personally does not consider him or her to reach the goals in the syllabi. One can therefore say that during such circumstances the test result is crucial, and whether the student will pass the subject of English is, in such cases, entirely up to his or her result on the national test. Two teachers however, claim that they would not pass the student even if he or she passed the national test if they considered them on a level under the grade 'Pass'. Interestingly, none of

the five teachers made any comments that they required a high 'Pass' in order to upgrade up a student from 'Fail' to 'Pass'. This can also be noted in the teachers grading of the sample text. Even though the text was considered very weak, two teachers gave the text the grade 'Pass'. But, if student were to be upgraded up from a 'Pass' to a 'Pass with distinction' most teachers required a high 'Pass with distinction' on the national test. It therefore seems to be easier to be upgraded up to the grade 'Pass' than to a 'Pass with distinction'. This result is supported in Auer and Sandqvist's report (2007: 14-25) where it is stated that it is more common that students receive a higher final grade if they fail the national test but less common that students receive a higher final grade when they pass the test.

6 Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate if the assessment of national tests can be considered to be consistent and reliable but also to find out if teachers use the national test as an important basis when determining a student's final grade. The results of this investigation showed that the national test results have an immense impact on final grades, especially if the student's grade is uncertain. Most of the teachers asked were of the opinion that the national test grade is crucial when it comes to determining a student's final grade. Only two (out of seven) teachers claimed that they did not consider the test result crucial. If the student accomplished better than expected most teachers would let the national test grade determine the final grade.

Since it has been shown that the final grades are influenced by national test grades, it is of great importance that the assessment of the national test is fair and consistent and that the result of the assessment will be the same no matter who conducts the assessment. The sample text that was assessed by seven different teachers was graded differently. Five teachers graded the sample text 'Pass' and two teachers graded it 'Fail'. One must therefore question if the national test contributes to comparability and fairness of grades. The assessment differences indicate otherwise.

When test grades and final grades correlate it might seem as if the interpretation of the nationally decided goals and criteria is similar for different teachers. But it might simply be evidence that many teachers use the national test as a basis when setting student's final grades. If national tests are not assessed in the same way among different teachers, final grades cannot be considered to be fair and comparable.

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